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Interdependence in Rural Russia: the postsocialist mixed feudal economy¹

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Abstract

The concept of ‘feudalism’ has been, for better or for worse, bound to an economic and social system that many argue has not existed since most western European serfs made the transition to free peasant status in the 1300s. Russia, however, poses a challenge to this structure. It is not until the late 15th and into the 16th century that serfdom finally emerged in Russia. This distinctly Russian style of feudalism laid the foundation for the agricultural systems found in Russia even today. This paper examines village life in post-Soviet Russia and elaborates on what appear to be clear connections to feudal systems. The decollectivisation of farming has resulted not in a growing market-driven independent farming trend, but instead a reworking of the collective organisation resulting in a distinct symbiotic, but unequal, agricultural situation. Relationships among the villagers, between the villagers and the farm director, and between the director and local authorities all contain strands that are best understood as feudal in nature. The privatisation of property, intended to destroy any vestiges of feudalism in rural Russia, has not encouraged an increase in economic productivity in the rural areas. The question remains, what will it take to free the serfs in 21st century Russia?

¹ Sincere appreciation to Anja Peleikis, John Eidson and Chris Hann who gave very useful comments on an earlier draft of this paper, which was drafted while I held a postdoc at the MPI in Halle in 2002. Thanks also to Nancy E. Levine whose suggestions were critical.

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Introduction

In July of 2002 I found myself sitting on a woodpile outside of my friend Valya's house. I had just finished one interview and I was heading to my next when I found myself perplexed. I was surprised by the similar story I was hearing again and again; that of a household increasing production on their personal plot while maintaining some level of involvement (employment) on the parent farm. There were individual details of selling surplus milk, meat or vegetables to other villagers or in the local market, but most labor resulted in products reserved exclusively for household consumption. "I am not studying farmers engaged in a developing, capitalist, free-market economy," I told myself, "I am studying Russian peasants who are tied to the *kolkhoz* farm director for support and protection." Villagers' choices to weave together an expanded household production with existing ties to the collective struck me as a purely rational decision. What I found puzzling was the unbalanced yet symbiotic nature of the relationship. 'Unbalanced' because the collective and the director still have the upper-hand in village affairs. Wholly 'symbiotic' in nature, however, since apparently both the household and the parent farm would suffer should the system unravel.

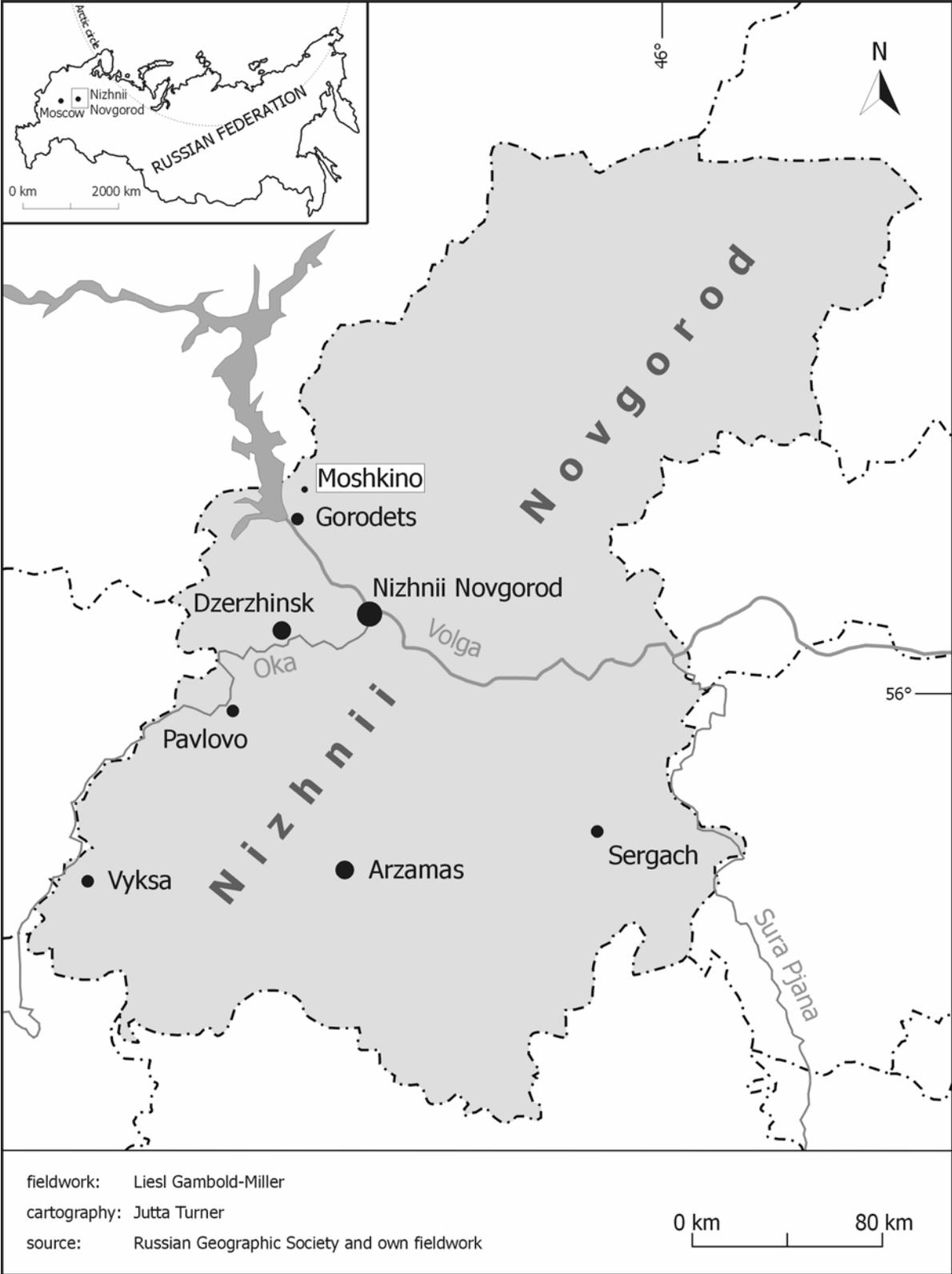
The fabric of the post-socialist village has more than a few strands of feudalism woven into it. I am not, however, convinced that what exists in the Volga region of Russia today is a feudal system writ large. Drawing on Verdery's use of feudalism as "both metaphor and social system" (1996: 208), one can view the contradictions on Russia's decollectivised farms as a cleaving of imagined results from lived realities. Rural Russia has, what Kula calls, a "feudal residue" weighing heavily on the economic and social life of the countryside (1976: 14). The comparison is there for the making. As mentioned, today most of the rural inhabitants in the village Moshkino are subsistence peasants tied to the former *kolkhoz*, or parent farm, and its director, Ekaterina. They provide her with labor to work the farm, Moshkinskoe, and she provides them with payments in kind, access to social welfare, and occasional cash payments. All of the actors are caught in the stream of decollectivisation, which, I contend, does not flow directly to the sea of capitalism. There are many tributaries, many sub-currents, and it is useful to examine these variations.

Economic theories of capitalism are inadequate for analysing contemporary Russia. Here I step away from formal economists who still insist on seeing Russia as ripe for a capitalist reading, and inevitably a failing mark. The formalist approach leaves too much unattended to and the

peculiarities of a hybrid system such as Russia's, one that is neither collective nor fully integrated into the market, fall outside of the realm of capitalist structures (Kula 1976: 14).

The situation in the Russian village where I work is not unique, nor should I suggest that it represents all of reorganised Russian farming. It is, rather, representative of a particular outcome based on the over-all (political, social, economic, cultural and psychological) biography of the region. However, the region under study is not unlike many other European Russian areas and any casual reading of the scholarly material available will show abundant similarities between 'my' village and others. Russia, as we all know, is enormous, so any attempt to describe what is happening in 'Russia' must necessarily be tied down, seen as a product of particulars as much as, or possibly even more so, a shared political past.

Map: The fieldsite



Background

My research was carried out in the Nizhegorodskaja *oblast*. This *oblast* is large by Central Russian standards and longer from north to south (430 km) than from east to west (360 km). Located 400 kilometres south east of Moscow, this *oblast* of nearly four million people was the pre-Soviet ‘pocketbook of Russia’. Though not an agricultural breadbasket, the *oblast*, part of the Volga-Vyataka economic region, sustained moderate success in its farming and food production. Prior to the 1917 revolution, the capital city of Nizhnii Novgorod was Russia’s premier commercial site, a trading center at the confluence of two great rivers, the Volga and the Oka. Nizhnii Novgorod remained the industrial center of the USSR as it was turned into a primary site for military defense production. Because of its military importance, the city was closed to foreigners in 1930 and reopened only in 1991.

In general, agriculture is more productive in the southern part of the *oblast* than in the north, both for climatic and agronomic reasons. In the southernmost part of the region the general soil quality is good as it tails into the extremely productive *chernozem*, or black earth, soil of southern Russia. In principle, large-scale grain production can be profitable here. In the north of the *oblast*, the summer season is estimated to be two weeks shorter than in the south, and much of the area is forested and might be more suitable for cattle farming or smallholdings. Moshkino is located in the central western part of the *oblast*.

By the end of 1992, the city of Nizhnii Novgorod had become a leader in economic reforms in Russia. The first privatisation had taken place here in April 1992 with the ‘International Finance Corporation’ assisted privatisation of shops. Then-governor Boris Nemtsov requested a ‘pilot farm reorganisation program’ for the *oblast* in 1993, so the *oblast* was also the birthplace of decollectivisation. Here I use the term ‘reorganisation’ to refer to the privatisation of farms using the federally approved model for restructuring former state and collective farms. This process was tested on five farms in the Nizhegorodskaja *oblast* in 1993. By contrast, ‘reform’ refers to the economic shift from the centralised state-controlled system of the communist Soviet Union to a supply and demand based market economy system.

The Farm Enterprise

The large *kolkhoz* ‘60 Years October’ employed residents in Moshkino and neighboring villages prior to reorganisation. During the reorganisation auction, most of the 3,109 hectares of the

collective were distributed to three newly reorganised farms: Mir, Kolos, and Moshkinskoe. The 'Joint Stock Company farm' Moshkinskoe is located in and around the village of Moshkino. In March 1994, the farm was reorganised under the direction of Ekaterina Nikolaevna Makaricheva, former accountant, economist and eventual sub-chairman of the '60 Years October' *kolkhoz*. Ekaterina worked on the *kolkhoz* for 16 years before assuming the role of director for the new enterprise. Moshkinskoe received 1,477 hectares of land, the largest of the three reorganised farms. Of this they currently plant only about 900 hectares. They also received 400 cows, 200 pigs and six horses, but less property in terms of machinery and permanent buildings than the other farms. There are 14 villages that contribute to the total organisation of the Moshkinskoe farm. That is, residents in these villages have 'trusted' their collective land shares to the Moshkinskoe farm. Moshkino is only one of these villages, the largest – consisting of 54 houses – and most centrally located. Most of the other villages are very small, containing only 15 to 25 homes.³

The farm has four year-round barns and one summer barn. A central building for the clubhouse contains offices for farm management, personnel, and the doctor. In addition there is a small, privately operated store, two garage buildings, and a lumber processing plant, which they rent to an independent enterprise. They also have the former Moshkino school building, which remains vacant, and a canteen, which operates in the summer months.

My first and longest period of research in the village was from 1997-1998. When I left in April of 1998 there were 92 salaried workers at Moshkinskoe. In July 2002 when five additional weeks of research were carried out, there were 36 full-time workers and the total village population was 165, down from roughly 200 in 1998. During the summer harvest of 2002, in order to augment their labor force, they had begun to hire teenagers and unemployed people through a local program. The number of supplementary workers fluctuated from day to day but averaged between 15 and 30. The chief agronomist told me that they have enough workers for the off-season work but are forced to hire many during the planting and harvesting months. She explained that while this arrangement helps the seasonal workers and the farm, it is costly since they have to pay temporary workers at the end of their work day, leaving no room for payment delays or payments in kind. This creates a cash depletion that tends to affect the full-time workers' wage payments during these busiest months.

³ It should be noted that residents in these villages are free to work on any of the other reorganised farms in the region, it is simply their proximity to Moshkino that renders them as part of this symbolic *kolkhozni raion* (collective district).

Feudalism

In 1897, F. W. Maitland wrote that “feudalism is an unfortunate word” and warned against trying to make “this single idea represent a very large piece of the world’s history” (1897: 66-67). But Bloch encourages us that “words, like well-worn coins, in the course of constant circulation lose their clear outline” and that contemporary uses of the word ‘feudal’ reliably cover “a whole complex of ideas” that may fall outside of the realm of medieval feudalism (1961: xvii). Verdery also illustrates the ‘feudal’-concept as one marked more by variation than stasis (1996: 227). Applying the idea of feudalism to circumstances found beyond the general limits of what is considered ‘feudal’ may be risky. ‘Feudalism’, it has been argued, represents a fixed set of constituents occurring in various degrees in various places but at remarkably specific times in history. Time changes everything, not the least of which political and economic categories. Therefore, I think it is important and useful to use historical concepts, like feudalism, freeing them from unnecessary geographic or chronological limitations.

K. B. McFarlane (1981), in his examination of the feudalism emerging in the early 14th century, popularised the concept of ‘bastard feudalism’. In order to describe an institution that still contained the most important characteristics of feudalism, but noticeably weaker versions, as well as new economic structures, McFarlane found the need for a semantic shift. Systems are not coherent bundles that remain tightly bound and neatly mapped onto people and cultures. They are rough around the edges and porous. They are fragmented and polymorphic. They move forward and back, just as people do. Capitalism, socialism, feudalism, and communism are all multi-stranded systems. What social scientists can and should engage in is looking at which strands are most pronounced and most vital to the life of the over-all system before us. So, in the case of Moshkino and other areas in Russia, there are particulars directly related to what we know as a feudal system.⁴ In addition, there are strands we find that differ. Feudalism, or any label, as an identification or a genre, is useful only as long as one uses it to clarify relationships and systems. Categories should help expand our criticisms, not weigh them down. It is valid to apply the category of ‘feudalism’ since the point is not so much to classify as to clarify ‘strands’ or aspects that “would not be noticed as long as there were no context established for them” (Frye 1957: 247).⁵

⁴ See Goody's description of feudalism in Africa for a classic account of the applicability of the concept (1971).

⁵ I am grateful to John Eidson for this suggestion and his comments.

Feudalism in Russia

The debate as to whether Russia was ever truly feudal is a long one. It has been largely a Slavophile-westerner debate. Russian intellectuals who wished to view the Russian experience as unique, claimed that Russia went straight from the “patriarchal or communal stage” of social development to political unity without an intermediate phase of feudalism. They were pitted against the westerners who argued that Russia and Europe had common developmental and historical paths and thus both had a feudal period (Blum 1961: 90). Today most Soviet scholars agree that Russia did go through a feudal period.

Feudalism came much later to Russia and eastern Europe than it did to western Europe. By 600, serfdom had appeared in western Europe, peaking in the Middle Ages. In the 1300s, especially after the Black Death in mid-century, many serfs made the transition to free peasant status. The opposite situation occurred in Russia, Eastern Germany, and Poland. There serfdom did not exist even as late as the mid 1400s. Peasants in Russia were ‘free’, although they lived on state lands for which they paid taxes. There were indentured slaves at this time but even they could, with the permission of their master, buy, sell, and exchange property.

During the Mongol era in the 14th century, land ownership in Russia assumed greater importance not because of economic growth or the strength of the markets, but precisely because of a stagnation in the market and the low cash returns that production apparently provided (Blum 1961: 73). A decrease in market activities resulted in an increase in individual subsistence production that relied on having property. During this era and into the 16th century there were no restrictions on the right to own land. Class was no barrier as men of all ranks held “real property” in full possession (ibid.). However, the ruler in each region considered all of the land in his region his property as part of his patrimony. Though the prince claimed ownership of all of the land in his region this meant little to the individual landowners who were responsible “neither for service nor allegiance” to the ruler (Blum 1961: 80). This relative freedom prevailed for the Russians until the 16th century, when the rulers of Moscow established their domination over the Russian land.

In the late 15th and into the 16th century, serfdom finally emerged in Russia. The devastation caused by the wars which plagued eastern Europe contributed to the growing strength of the nobility, while the increasing demand for grain in western Europe gave the nobility a motive to seize land and force peasants onto it. The prince of Muscovy, to whom many nobles owed

loyalty, cooperated in restricting the peasantry with law codes in 1497 and 1550 limiting peasant movement. By the 1600s serfdom had become a hereditary status in Russia.

Feudal society in any state has distinct characteristics. It is a predominantly agrarian society in a period of economic or political decline. It is characterised by a weak central power, unable to enforce laws or implement changes at a local level. There is a low level of production and the market economy is stagnant, or not yet developed. There is an absence of civil society. This results in a vertically organised power schema characterised by mutual dependency between hierarchical levels. Feudalism refers to a corporate system “in which the basic unit of production is a large landed estate surrounded by the small plots of peasants who are dependent on the former both economically and juridically” (Kula 1976: 9). Exchange is also said to play a smaller part in the economic life of feudal systems than payment in kind. Given the history and framework of feudalism, what are the prospects in Moshkino today and what strands of feudalism are most prevalent?

A Feudal Joint Stock Company

The number of individual family farms in Russia is approximately 261,000, the average size being 55 hectares, a decrease of 20,000 in the total number of farms since 1995 but an increase in the average size. This makes up about 2% of all agricultural enterprises. In July of 1997 a report in *The Economist* stated that only 3% of all agricultural workers were “private farmers” (1997, 12 July: 17). These are not the statistics western economists who engineered Russian decollectivisation had hoped for. The primary expectation was, after all, that reforming Russian agriculture would result in tremendous initial difficulties but more important, the eventual taking up of individual farming and profit-oriented strategies.

In Moshkino, the transformation from collective to individual farming is failing. During research in 1998 I believed that the reason for this unenthusiastic growth in individual farming was the inherent desire of Russian peasants to farm collectively. This inherent desire, I argued, was based more on internalised and culturally accepted forms of labor exchange and social welfare than any primordial Russian *dusha*, or soul (Miller 2000). The tie to the social safety net of the farm was too important, and too strong, to cut. At the same time I also felt sure that one woman, Tatiana, who was establishing herself as an independent pig farmer would succeed. By

2002 I had to reconsider things. There are no independent farmers in Moshkino.⁶ Two had tried to strike out on their own and make a living by farming but both were forced to quit. One came back to Ekaterina and the Moshkinskoe farm, the other, Tatiana, in whom I had so much hope, now sells some potatoes and vegetables but relies heavily on buying goods wholesale (grains, cereals and fruits) in Nizhnii Novgorod and selling them in Moshkino and other local markets. In all fairness to economists, Tatiana should still be considered a success because she manages to earn an income independently from the parent farm. Hers is the only household out of 54 that is not directly linked to Ekaterina or the Moshkinskoe farm.⁷ Most Moshkino residents, and many in other villages as well, are tied to the former *kolkhoz* and the support it can still offer.⁸ Tatiana, however, is trying to keep herself independent, but occasionally finds herself taking advantage of the possibilities made available by the *kolkhoz*. Less than two years ago she was still buying pigs and calves from Ekaterina because they were so inexpensive. Now, however, trying to “keep myself independent” she buys them from her in-laws in Gorodets, 15 kilometres away.

Tatiana is 41 years old and was born in the neighboring village of Ruiya. She and her husband both used to work on the collective farm – she as an agronomist and he as a tractor driver. After reorganisation both continued to work on Moshkinskoe under Ekaterina’s direction. Tatiana was optimistic about decollectivisation and told me that she had high hopes for the potential of independent farming.⁹ After only one year she decided to take her land shares out of the farm and register as an independent farmer. She said: “There was no difference between the *kolkhoz* and this Moshkinskoe farm. It is the same thing. I wanted to farm independently, so I had to separate myself.” She and her husband combined their land shares with the shares of her deceased father, her mother, who lives in a neighboring village, and her cousin, who gave his shares to her. In total they ended up with 30 hectares of land as well as a tractor and all of the necessary equipment for planting and harvesting potatoes.¹⁰ Tatiana is an anomaly, however. She is an industrious person who would succeed in most circumstances, but she feels she is fighting an uphill battle. When I asked what her feelings are about private farming in Russia she said:

⁶ Here ‘independent farmer’ refers to one making their living exclusively through the selling of plant or animal products produced on their individual farm.

⁷ Out of permanent households inhabited year-round.

⁸ See Nikulin (2002) for an insightful description of the *krupkhoz*, the symbiotic state of contemporary, large rural enterprises and village households. Visser (forthcoming) also illustrates this dependent relationship by noting that the farm enterprise is ‘the last piece of bread’ for the employees.

⁹ Tatiana is the only person in the village who ever expressed support for the reorganisation of collective farming.

¹⁰ For an account of the complex strategies they were forced to use to acquire equipment and the necessary funds to make their private farming attempt see Miller (2001).

“I feel that we are not needed by anybody but we still want to survive. Two to three years ago the head of the administration in Gorodets gathered all of the independent farmers together for a meeting. He was not satisfied with our work and one of the farmers at the end of the meeting stood up and asked: ‘Tell us what products you want from us. We can reorganise our farms very easily and grow what you would like.’ And the administrator said: ‘I do not need anything from you.’ You see, there is no support for us anymore. I think private farmers in Russia cannot succeed but they can survive.”

However unique Tatiana’s experience, her feelings were not singular. Everyone in the village with whom I spoke said that they did not see how the prospects for individual farming could develop in Russia. Some argued that more money was needed to support farmers, others that pricing was the main problem. Tatiana asserted that the biggest barrier to her success was pricing. She explained: “Grains, vegetables, and grasses have been [sold at] the same price for four years already, but petrol is seven times more expensive and fertilizer is four times more expensive [than it was four years ago]. How can we make a profit given these conditions?”¹¹ Ekaterina made the same complaint and added that the price disparity eats away at the workers’ incentive. “They know how much we are paying for petrol and how much we are selling milk and grain for. They can add it up. How can I expect them to feel as hopeful as I do about the farm?”, she wondered.

Russian farms are forced to operate “exposed to the harsh vagaries of price, without, however, having the benefits of a market” (Humphrey 1998: 444). Because the production on the farm is not profitable, Ekaterina feels more obligated to provide the villagers with basic needs. This is one reason why she continues with clearly unprofitable activities like keeping so many cattle and pigs. Lilia, the Moshkinskoe head accountant, complained that money is always lost in meat production (or sales of animals) but, she said: “We keep them so workers can have them. Ekaterina keeps the prices too low so the workers and those who need help can afford them. It is not good for the farm but it is good for the people.” Lilia summed up the main problem with Moshkinskoe and these mixed feudal economies; what is good for the people is not always good for the enterprise.

¹¹ Four years ago a liter of petrol costs 3.5 rubles, in July of 2002 it costs 7.5 rubles. One liter of milk is sold from the farm for 3.8 rubles and sold in stores for 7-15 rubles depending on packaging.

The Ties that Bind

To an outsider visiting in 2002 the Moshkinskoe farm would have seemed barely functioning with its 38 workers and considerable debt. The situation, however, is not uncommon and many collective farms are bankrupt but are not forced to go out of business (Humphrey 2002: 167). They are living on the various complex movements of products and finances from their accounts to those of other enterprises, such as the dairy processing plant. One substantive change encountered in 2002 was the contraction of the economic sector of the farm. The cashlessness of the village as a whole was an issue in 1997-1998, but the farm had occasional access to bank loans and government subsidies giving them a cash infusion a few times a year. Currently, however, the loans and subsidies have dried up and the farm is faced with mounting debt. Now I will consider two areas that are impossible to completely separate, the economic structure of the farm and how social ties are being used or repartitioned as the prospects for the farm decline.

Each of the former *kolkhoz* workers still have rights to their land and property shares, or *pai*, that were distributed at the farm reorganisation in 1994. As was the case in all of Russia, these were distributed based on years of work at the *kolkhoz* and salary level. Property shares mean nothing to Moshkinskoe workers. Not one has ever received a dividend in cash or in kind for property shares. Ekaterina has access to all of the property not already taken out of the collective. As noted, only two former collective workers took their property shares out after reorganisation. At the time they were given a tractor or other equipment and cash for any shares in permanent buildings. One Moshkino resident, Dmitri, gave a typical response to the question “What property shares did you receive?”. He said: “We did not get anything, we just know that something belongs to us, but we do not really feel it. [Property shares] are used by the collective and we do not get any dividends (...). I have never seen any document connected with the property but I do have the one for land.” Land shares, on the other hand, do pay dividends but only in hay or straw and the amount varies depending on the over-all harvest. Ekaterina uses all of the land shares for the farm. The usual size of the land share received for *kolkhoz* membership at the time of reorganisation and then ‘leased’ to Ekaterina was 4.5 hectares. When I asked shareholders if they knew where in the fields their land shares were located, none could tell me. They knew that the hay and straw fields where their dividend payments came from were ‘over there’, but they had no idea where their particular land was. They also did not seem to care. If any of them wanted to remove their land shares from the collective, I was told that a land committee would survey the fields and find an appropriate piece of land along the edge of a field. What

mattered most to residents were their personal kitchen gardens, typically around one-half a hectare. This is ‘their’ land, their most prized and productive property, along with their home.

With only 38 full-time workers it hardly seems plausible to call Ekaterina a modern day *suzerain*. However, for those workers, their families, and other residents in the village, especially the pensioners, Ekaterina does fulfil the position of an authority, a protector, a provider, a patron. In addition, there are over 200 shareholders in several villages connected to the Moshkinskoe farm.¹² Therefore, Ekaterina’s ties extend well beyond the boundaries of her payroll and the Moshkino village.

What needs to be teased out a bit more is the unbalanced power relationship between Ekaterina and the peasants. Some analyses of feudalism position the political connection between landowner and tenant above other strands of the relationship. In addition, the state’s willingness to support the landowner’s domination over the tenants is undoubtedly a critical component of rural feudal systems (Brooks 2002: 110). The vertical structure of power typical of feudal societies still exists in rural Russia. An important difference, however, is that Ekaterina’s position of power is solidified not by any connection to the President, but by her connections to the local administration and some *oblast* officials.¹³ Ekaterina has access to resources and information that most villagers lack. She attends political meetings, locally and at the *oblast* level, and maintains ties with various agricultural consultants. In addition, she was chosen to travel to the United States to tour farms with other newly decollectivised farm directors. She has a car and driver – most directors have a car and women rarely drive in Russia – and makes frequent trips to the *raion* center for meetings and shopping. While many of these markers help to maintain her status in the village, she appears not to have any conspicuous wealth accumulated due to her position. However, she does seem less anxious about her future than other Moshkino residents do.

Despite the benefits of being the director, Ekaterina also has the lion’s share of burdens. She told me in 1997 that she had too many workers, but she would not let any of them go. She did not even fire the milkmaid who went out to a barn drunk one night and tried to burn the twine off a hay bale resulting in the complete destruction of the barn and most of the cows inside. “Where else could she go?” Ekaterina wondered, “She has three kids and her husband is even worse than she is.” The guilty woman suffered a tarnished reputation and some social snubs but continued to

¹² These shareholders were all workers on the former *kolkhoz*, or spouses of former workers.

¹³ Ekaterina is not an exception as there are several female heads of farms in the area. It is, however, unclear whether this regional characteristic stands out in Russia as a whole. Ekaterina’s family has lived and farmed in Moshkino for at least four generations, dating back to when her great-grandfather farmed his own land, which gives her an elevated socio-historical position in relation to others.

do menial tasks for Ekaterina around the farm. Ekaterina did fire a few workers but most left on their own between 1998 and 2000. Tired of wage delays, which were common then, they sought work either in a nearby town or at the neighboring *kolkhoz*, Mir, which managed to be gaining strength.

While Ekaterina's maternalistic care of the village serves many of the residents and workers well, others had definite complaints. They said that she needed to be more "authoritarian", "stronger", "a better manager", "spend more time in the fields", "be harder on people", and "act meaner". Not surprising, these were usually the grievances of the full-time workers. They want strong leadership in hopes it will result in increased pay. One way they have made economic gains is through the departure of so many workers.

The dramatic decrease in workers on the farm had an economic benefit. Moshkinskoe workers are now paid regularly, which means that they are given regular cash payments but almost never their entire month's salary. Most months they are paid with a combination of cash and product. In July 2002 packages of butter (12 per person) were dispensed a few days after cash payments. Cash flow is weak, I would say, but it is understandably critical. This is no longer a cashless economy, as it was right after the reforms, but it is cash poor. The average salary, the amount they should be paid, during the planting or harvest seasons is 1500-2000 rubles per month (roughly \$50-60) and 500-600 rubles a month the rest of the year (roughly \$16). The national minimum subsistence level in 2001 was 1500 rubles per month with 40 million, or 27% of the population, living below that level.

The workers are economically tied to Ekaterina and to the legal status of the farm. As hired workers they have rights and obligations, though neither are as clearly defined as some would like. However, having some flexibility in these areas seems to benefit both Ekaterina and the workers. She is not bound to strict rules in payment amount, form, or timing. This enables her to make decisions independently about what will most 'benefit' the farm, or more likely, what will keep the farm operating through another season. The workers, for their part, feel free to use their time and some of the farm's equipment and supplies for their home gardens.¹⁴ I have found no evidence indicating that Ekaterina is exploiting her position for excessive personal gain. Unlike the successors to the agricultural productive cooperatives of the former GDR, whose persistent

¹⁴ Perhaps this is more a return of the *barshchina* system. *Barshchina*, or labor obligations, did not become prevalent in Russia until the 16th century. Peasants were forced to work two or three days a week. While written agreements were not often made between the seignior and the peasants, records show that in the late 16th century Russian peasants who had to do *barshchina* spent from one third to one half of their time working in the demesne fields and the rest of the time they could work on their own land (Blum 1961: 226).

presence has been linked to the “exploitation of power and authority” by their directors, so-called ‘red-barons’, I believe Moshkinskoe remains solvent because of the multi-stranded economic and social functions it provides to everyone (Eidson 2001: 25). As in feudal society, the system, however inequitable, makes provisions for those on top as well as those below.

Prospects and Prosperity in the Village

The transformation from collective to private farming in Russia certainly epitomises an “event of change” (Barth 1981: 105). While economic troubles have been the focus of much scholarly debate, the social aspect of this transformation has received minimal discussion.¹⁵ This oversight, or misdirected focus, reflects the illusion that the Russian *kolkhoz* was predominantly an agricultural economic endeavour. The identity of the village has been tied directly to the *kolkhoz* for decades and therefore, so has the identity of the peasants. This identity feature, as a member of this or that *kolkhoz*, seems to have been much more important than any ties to a particular village, or even to any particular land. The yearning that people over 35 in Moshkino express is for the *kolkhoz* and all that it signified. This is not anti-market behaviour; it is linked to the social quality of the collective and how it “corresponded in many ways to indigenous and deeply felt concepts of the social unity” (Humphrey 2002: 169). The collective, like the feudal demesne, is both an economic and a social structure with unifying principles.

A predominant feeling persists among villagers that the social life of the villages pre-reorganisation had a more meaningful structure and an aura of social well-being and *communitas* (Turner 1969). This collective and individual longing and lament can only assist Russians trying to reorganise their ideological and psychological worlds after watching all that they had known collapse around them (see Ries 1997 for excellent analysis of this in an urban setting). For an American or western European it seems illogical to wax nostalgic about a time defined by iron curtains and cement walls. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the Berlin Wall were characterised in the west as moments of deliverance for the poor inhabitants who had not yet tasted the rich freedom of democracy and capitalism. To hear the Russian peasant, again and again, look back towards ‘better’ times, one must begin to consider that the aftermath of this 20th century emancipation might genuinely be lacking. The absence of forward or entrepreneurial thinking among villagers adds further feudal strands to village organisation. Bloch suggested that

¹⁵ For discussion on the social aspects of agricultural reform see Wegren (1994, 1998), Miller (2000, 2002), O’Brien (1998), Ioffe and Nefedova (1997), Humphrey (1998).

in feudal society “many influences combined to encourage an interest in the past (...) [feudalism] rejected the optimism which had caused other ages to be interested only in the present or the future” (1961: 88). One need only consider that the market reforms in Russia ended up in one of the greatest peace-time economic contractions to understand the desire to glance backward (Bernstam and Rabushka 2000). There are many indicators of this despondency: increasing alcoholism rates, increasing death rates, decreasing birth rates, increased poverty and enormous health problems.

My strong intuition when I left Moshkino in 1998, that the villagers were inherently opposed to individual farming was not significantly altered when I returned in 2002. I still believe, and they still tell me, that they would much rather farm collectively and be successful. Even with the prospect of having enough machinery and land for themselves, most were not enthusiastic supporters of becoming *fermeri*. They often complained that as an independent farmer one would have to work too hard. Humphrey notes that the peasants see independent farming as troublesome and only something a ‘mad person’ would want (2002: 169). One Moshkinskoe worker concurred: “How could I go out and do all of the work in the fields by myself or even with my sons and then come home and do the work around here? It is impossible.”¹⁶ What Pasha had not considered was that he could, as part of his business, grow most of the products his family would need. His work, for which he could earn his own money, could also provide his household with much of the basic subsistence goods they now must cultivate ‘on the side’. Tatiana, for example, said that they sell 90% of their harvest and keep 10% for household consumption. While she buys and sells to earn money for purchase of market goods, she still relies on her own labor for the basic household food items.

Pasha’s pessimistic perception about farming individually, echoed by numerous others, reflected two important but distinct features of rural Russian life. First, their strong ties to their personal gardens are visible in the proportion of work they devote to household crops or livestock. Villagers told me dozens of times that without their gardens they would simply starve to death. It is clear the importance of these kitchen gardens is only growing. Second, Pasha’s premature conclusion that he could not manage to farm alone also supports the notion that the peasants feel a substantial connection to the village as *kolkhoz*. They are part of a larger whole and to be alone, to be independent, means taking unnecessary economic and social risks more than it means potentially making economic and social gains. What must be understood is the

¹⁶ I found his opinion curious given the undeniable fact that village women do almost all of the daily work with the domesticated animals and gardens.

complexity of the dyadic nature of peasant and collective. The peasant envisions herself as part of a whole and as being made whole herself in that process (Humphrey 1998: 478). The director is not immune to this feeling. Ekaterina became the director precisely because of a sense of belonging and obligation to the community. She said: “I could not just let the peasants, especially the pensioners who have worked here all their lives, suffer. I thought I would take over and the market would develop and things would get better. But, as you see, things seem worse and they need me now more than ever. But, I am still optimistic.”

Who is Saving Whom?

The Russian collective has been characterised as ‘personal’ in nature, contradicting the typical western perspective assuming “an inherent conflict of interests between the individual and the abstract and faceless ‘collective’” (Kingston-Mann 1991: 48). Ekaterina has a very personal relationship with local villagers. It is not clearly bound by economic or legal systems.¹⁷ No doubt Ekaterina is interested in preserving her position as director – it affords her both economic and social status – but the situation cannot be said to reflect more than the personal or political aspirations of the director. The historic ‘personal’ nature of the collective, probably more propaganda than anything, is feeling the strain of modernisation and the market economy the same way rural communities throughout the world have seen their communal, reciprocal, face-to-face interactions pushed aside by the individualistic, profit-motives of contemporary society. This results in unequal but sustaining ties and “culturally specific enactments of appeasement, anger, and fate that are not reducible to reciprocity” (Humphrey 2002: 167). In other words, Ekaterina's position is one of fate, one that she found herself in despite her reluctance, but one that has well positioned her in these times of transition. Everyone has an agenda and the irony lies in the fact that the miserable upheaval masquerading as the transformation to a market economy seems to be providing each with what he needs. Ekaterina gets her freedom, her farm, her people, her dreams of success, while the workers get their cheap meat, goods in kind, wages, social services and occasional haranguing by the director. The same could be said, though not with as much certainty, about a feudal system. “It would be quite wrong,” one historian writes, “to assume that the interests and rights of the many were simply sacrificed to the interests and rights of a few rulers, that the manor was nothing but an estate, cultivated and exploited for the sake of the lord

¹⁷ Though current infrastructural gaps would make any further systemisation of agriculture impossible.

(...)" (Vinogradoff 1968: 470). The English manor to which he refers was not dissimilar from other feudal regions, and it provided the most 'convenient' and 'necessary' arrangements for work and profit. In addition it served a "double mechanism" (ibid: 475) of facilitating the civil and social lives of villagers, much like the *kolkhoz*.

In feudal society, the economy was such that wage-earning was unreliable at all levels. Part of the reason for the *suzerain* system in which kings granted land, or *fiefs*, to nobles in exchange for their loyalty, was the basic fact that the kings could not afford to pay the noblemen. Granting them their own lands and control over everything on those lands enabled the lords to provide for themselves. These lands eventually developed into manors, which consisted of the castle, the church, the village, and the surrounding farmland. At the lowest echelon of society were the peasants for whom, in exchange for living and working on his land, the lord offered protection. The king had his army staffed and his countryside looked after, the nobles, barons and bishops had their manors and anything they could extract from the peasants, and the peasants had their protection, their land, their home and anything they could withhold from the lords.

It takes little stretch of the imagination to see Moshkino as a manor, albeit a dysfunctional one. The combined efforts of the director and the *sel'soviet*, or local administration, enable the Moshkinskoe farm to stay alive as a legal entity while still supporting vital production at both the collective and household level. There is a symbiotic relationship between the head of the administration, the director, and the peasants. There is also contradiction in their efforts. On one hand they are encouraged to move further toward private family farms and on the other they are working to save the collective structure. This exemplifies what Verdery called the "contradictory tendencies breaking down the center and shoring it up" (1996: 209) and reflects another similarity between the feudal and the socialist system. Even Marx suggested that strong peasant communities either fortified feudal estates or promoted "petty capitalism", so the complexity in Moshkino is not unique (Kingston-Mann 1983: 16-17). The political and social are inseparably bound to the local, to the farm, and to the administrators. There is an unmistakable dependency but also a very real security in the relationship (Clarke 1992: 7, Verdery 1996: 206).

At Moshkinskoe, the subsidies provided by the collective in the form of fodder, fertiliser, transport, winter fuel, and access to inexpensive domestic animals are made available not only to *kolkhoz* workers but also to village residents who are in good standing with the farm director. The result is that workers and non-workers alike often live in debt, actual or symbolic, to the collective (Humphrey 1998: 467). One problem with this in terms of basic economic theory is that the goods in kind given in place of cash payments often exceed the value of the wages earned

(ibid.). A sound economist would insist on making payments in cash simply to cut costs. However, since the farm still relies informally on some degree of barter, the director is able to hold on to cash until it is required. She knows that she can pay her workers in kind and they have come to expect it. The effect is that villagers continue to look up for help rather than from side to side. The vertical structure maintains hierarchy and retards any true development of ‘community’, in an economic and political realm, in the village. Moshkino has not begun to view itself as a ‘rural community’ with representative civic organisations. It is first and foremost a collective and a village organised around a collective. It matters little that most residents do not work for the collective farm any longer. All of them were directly associated with the farm at one time, and most still are, either directly or through ties with someone in the household.

The core of supporters around Ekaterina has decreased in number over the last four years. Those who remain seem resigned to having no alternative and thus have to accept their payments in kind, housing, cash wages, social services, and continued pension growth¹⁸ as adequate compensation for their work on Ekaterina’s farm. It is not such a bad trade-off. They stave off most risk since Ekaterina has formally and legally assumed it. With their personal land, their homes, and their animals, they emphatically state they have all they really need to survive.

The fact that Ekaterina has assumed the position of greatest risk does not, however, absolve the peasants of their own risk. Agriculture is always a risky business and peasants, I contend, are not inherently risk averse but do try persistently to manage the economic and psychological burden of potential failure (Miller 2001, 2002). Agricultural endeavors are marked by a consistent level of dread combined with “uncontrollability (...) and inequitable distribution of risk bearing” (Douglas 1999: 222). Moshkino residents hedge against this dread by working longer and harder in their own gardens, canning and jarring, stocking and storing, to provide themselves with some additional protection. This reflects the weakness of the market as is apparent in the inability for people to earn enough in wage labor for their subsistence needs. In addition, residents have found that they are better off if they diversify their labor. It is no longer possible to be an economically stable domestic unit if both adults earn their wage on the farm, although there are a number of such households. Because of continued wage delays¹⁹ and low cash payments in general, dual farm worker households are cash poor. Households with one adult earning a wage off the farm (in town, at the store, at the school) are much better off and have more cash and greater prospects.

¹⁸ Those who are still working on the reorganised collective continue to receive accumulated pension benefits, which they will collect in retirement.

¹⁹ Wage delays are not as frequent as they were in 1997-1998, but still occur three to four times a year.

Those with one adult working on the collective and one working in town seem to fare best. They are neither cash poor nor socially poor. Through the resident farm worker they are able to maintain the valuable social service networks available through work on the farm and they are guaranteed access to payments in kind from the director, which may be vital to a household's financial (selling of meat) and nutritional (consumption of meat) success. Though logically everyone's fields would be equally affected by drought, excessive rains or frost, the inequitable distribution of risk is more closely related to power and authority within the village. The risk to those who have jobs in the *kontoru*, or farm offices (the veterinarian, accountant, agronomist, assistant director), would be less since most of them, ironically, have a husband working off the farm and they occupy a space closer to the director, the holder of the symbolic purse.

The sharing of risk on the collective was also seen in the late 19th century commune of Russia. In contrast to western economic theories, which assured that private property represented the only reliable source of economic and social security "peasants in post emancipation Russia found their only security in transferring their land to the commune in return for rights to work the communal land" (Kingston-Mann 1991: 34). One peasant at that time argued that "it was private property that was risky and unreliable" and that the best way to look out for the needs of your family was to stay in the commune (ibid). While risk is assumed at all levels, it seems that one important similarity between a feudal and struggling post-socialist system is that everyone would suffer should the system disintegrate. While in both systems personal household subsistence could be maintained at a modest but sustainable level, the social service sector – reliant on the lord or the director – would be the greatest loss. In Moshkino this points to the obvious failure in the transfer of responsibility for social welfare services from the state to the local level administration. This is where the most enthusiastic finger-pointing takes place; the *oblast* administration points to the laws stating that *raion* administrations are responsible; the *raion* administration points to the decree that the *sel'soviet* is supposed to manage these services and the *sel'soviet* points to the collective director and tells me: "She knows what is really going on in the village. We can not help any more. We give them money and then it is up to the director to decide how it is spent. No one has success in these matters."

Conclusions

In a situation where the state infrastructure will not support rural economic growth one outcome is that a select few continue to manage/control things on the ground while the many, the peasants, dig in their heels and focus on their household needs. It is not a time of expansion, but one of retraction. It ought to be stressed that this is not an industrial endeavor, this is mid-level agriculture. Individuals are not moving into the network of the market economy. Instead there is an isolation of the Russian peasant. An active informal (shadow) economy was a standard by-product of communism and central planning. The result was a large web of critical informal ties moving goods throughout the country. Formal economic ties have pushed most of these networks aside replacing, or at least altering them, with transactions more reliant on a cash exchange. Though the peasants assert that they could exist without Ekaterina and the peasant farm – they are above all resistant to admit a complete dependence – they also display an obvious reliance on their ties to her. In light of the struggles the collective is experiencing, this adds to the pressures felt by the individual, a burden that used to be, even symbolically, shouldered by the group.

If the road to a fully functioning free market must include this separation, or individuation, of laborers, then they are well on their way in Moshkino. This individuation of labor bares a resemblance to the vertical structure of the feudal model but is quite distinct from the commune/*mir* system in Russia's past. Perhaps, as some have said, most Russian villages are doomed for extinction. Moshkino and the dozen small, isolated surrounding villages might find themselves turned into summer vacation areas. Already the summer population swells with *dachniki* who come in from town to work in gardens and enjoy the village's natural environment, indulging in the 'cult of *svyezhi*' (fresh products) as I call it. The isolation felt, and heard, in Moshkino might be a settling in for the fall, an enfolding or enclosing. This narrowing of their focus, the inverse of what one would expect as markets supposedly expand and the global economy sweeps in, is marked in Moshkino by a greater individual, household self-reliance, and fewer extended community ties than are seen elsewhere in Russia. It might be suggested that the situation in Moshkino is the result of low population density and poor agriculture in general, two characteristics leading to the downward spiral of the farm, and the village (Miller 2001).

Extending the image of feudalism to the current situation in Moshkino displays a heavy dependence on what history has taught us about both feudal society and pre-Soviet Russia. I recall Raymond Firth who wrote in 1951: "What I have said about the peasant society studied by the anthropologist is very much what the historian has described in other language for the

economic life of the Middle Ages” (1951: 137). This is obviously not a medieval feudal system, but there are shades of feudalism that are important.

Is it feudalism? Is it quasi-feudalism? A parafeudal system, closely resembling but not quite, unless we allow our concept of feudalism to expand or constrict as needed. Is it the “micro-feudalism” said to be emerging in parts of China with “the local neo-gentry providing protection and supervision of production practices, while guaranteeing the delivery of product and revenues to the state” (Muldavin 1998: 118)? Is it the parcelisation of sovereignty, as Verdery suggested, and is it seen in Vietnam through “socio-economic differentiation and local despotisms” (Watts 1998: 182)? Do we see more of a para-feudalism in Bulgaria which is said to have retained more of its feudal tradition in the form of a system of patronage administered by “the regional barons of the party” (Glenny 1993: 169)? The Russian government itself claimed it wanted to replace the “semi-feudal *kolkhozes* and *sovkhoses*” with family farms but early reform efforts have obviously failed to do so (Nickolsky 1998: 204).

Some contend that considering the current situation in the villages as feudal “restricts the analysis of interests and resources” (Lindner 2002) but I disagree. I find that beginning from the contemporary economic and political conditions in the village one comes naturally to a comparative axis where post-socialist conditions in rural Russia and feudalism meet. The two do not stay joined for long, nor do they take on a parallel existence, but there is some influence as they pass, one atop the other. The comparison is natural, but need not be binding. In the end, I suggest that this is a new kind of feudalism, a post-socialist mixed feudal economy done in the manner Russia does many things, its own way.

Whatever we call it, it is still developing and transforming. Prospects seem to arise then quickly abate and the peasants turn their activities toward preserving their property and ensuring household economic stability. At this point we can only describe the processes that are “combinations of ideas, material circumstances, and interactional potentials” seen in the village (Barth 1993: 4). If the “magic of property” (Kingston-Mann 1991: 23) was intended to obliterate any residues of feudalism in rural Russia – implanting instead the virtues of private ownership and the intended swell of economic productivity – it has yet to happen.

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